Multivocal Theatricalities: Articulating Data in Composites, Choruses, Crowds
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i.   theatricalities & multivocalities

Machines gain and make voices in many and different ways. At the end of April 2023, while Grimes released her AI voice, inviting the internet to make a song quite literally with her, Universal Music was chasing an unauthorised pop song that made use of the voices of two other Canadian artists – Drake and the Weeknd. Just a week before, Drake, responding to a different deepfake recording, commented 'This is the final straw AI' (Horon, 2023). It is worth noting that two key examples of open-access vocal masks are both art projects by women (Herndon, 2021; Grimes, 2023): their work with machines becomes particularly interesting when considered as an effort to outsource the embodied labour of performing. Both women, and I am talking about Holly Herndon and Grimes, are also white (as am I obviously: all three of us are similarly aged and often sport fine art-coded long hair with blunt fringes). And despite the fact that these women led a conversation about ownership and artistry in the midst of a proliferation generative AI creations, granting access to their voices through tools with which others can easily play with a voice that is not their own, the fact remains that it is deepfakes of black artists and experiments with vocal blackface that seem to be hold the internet's imagination most strongly.

By tracing a line from embodied discourse through to disembodied articulation, this paper asks what kind of data a voice *carries*, what kind of data a voice *is,* and – most essentially – what can be heard the frictions of voices coming together? An answer to these questions is, I propose, to be found in multivocal theatricality. And I will not be talking explicitly about race or gender, but rather about theatricality: however, theatricality is about embodiment, relation and the ways in which we are collectively implicated in the construction of knowledge and of meaning. And the power imbalances that track themselves across the coding of race and gender onto specific bodies is one way in which these abstracted ideas because vital and real.

Theatricality is a concept that helps illuminate what moves in these articulations. It names the ways in which a performance - artistic, social, cultural or political - shows

the terms and means of its construction (Burns, 1972; Carlson, 2002; Davis, 2003; Dunlop, *forthcoming*; Féral, 2013). It is used to describe what happens – what is gained, lost, implied – by the transformation of a text into a performance, and by the attending audience's awareness of, and participation in, that process. Like its kin term performativity, when the concept travels outside a theatre theatricality provides a powerful lens for understanding both knowledge and world-building as ongoing and collective endeavours.

Vocality is implicated in theatricality: a voice participates in its own unique, embodied, and relational performance that is also always already entangled with meaning and discourse. Multivocality is a means for thinking about how this embodiment and relationality manifest in speech, about how worlds are reflected and created through voice, through voices and their attendant possibilities (Butler, 2015; Cavarero, 2005; Dolar, 2006; Dunn and Jones, 1994; Meizel, 2020). Here, I use multivocality to evoke a few different meanings at once: firstly, as a literal reference to the many different – both distinct and iterative – voices that join in my examples; secondly, as an adjective that describes the this many-meaning-ed quality; and finally, as a term that connects these first two sense to the distinct and plural ways that vocality is, as Katherine Meizel writes in her book *Multivocalities,* 'both an embodied and constructed' process (Meizel, 2020, p. 11).

In what follows, I will use multivocal theatricality to connect the different ways voices come together and become real – in crowds of political action, both fictional and actual; in theatrical choruses, from Greek theatre to contemporary performance; and finally, in the vocal mimicry of machine composites.

ii.   knowledge systems & data

These ideas come out of my most recent project *select important things* (2022). I became interested in voices because I wanted to clone my own: I wanted to clone my own voice because I was trying to figure out how to give voice to the knowledge system I was creating: how to create a multivocality that also at the same time collapsed or contradicted any sense of difference between the voices present. *select important things is inspired by Knowledge Representation within machine learning as well as by feminist approaches to knowledge and contemporary crises of truth. It was sparked by an essay on Knowledge Representation produced by the MIT AI Lab in the mid-90s that considers how to "capture and represent the richness of the natural world" for the systems that teach machines how to use, interpret and create knowledge.*

In Knowledge Representation, as in basically all machine learning processes, data needs to be categorised and organised in some way to convert it from information into action: it is this conversion, in part, that I want to think through theatricality, while also asking how an inverse process – from a more solid form of 'data' into something both more specific and also less dependable – occurs in the making and using of vocal clones as masks or skins for other people's words. Obviously, this conversion isn't a neutral transformation. Rather, like performance, it is a process that constitutes a specific reality through its enactments.

In *Dear Science and Other Stories*, Katherine McKittrick is similarly focused on what accrues to the processes of conversion of information into data and back again: "Disciplines are coded and presented as disconnected from experiential knowledge; experiential knowledge is an expression of data (the objective census numbers factually show that the poor living here experience…)" (McKittrick, 2021, p. 36). The refrain throughout this story is "Discipline is empire": a statement about epistemological violence that McKittrick echoes off the work of Sylvia Wynter, Franz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, and Edward Said. In the stories throughout the book, McKittrick traces how data operates as disembodied articulation that disavows the embodied discourse it captures and converts: from contemporary algorithmic death

oracles in 'Failure' to the Zong's insurance policy in "(Zong) Bad Made Measure" (McKittrick, 2021).

Thinking alongside the critical reflections of these theorist, as well as work such as D'Ignazio and Klein*'s Data Feminism* (D'Ignazio and Klein, 2020), we can understand data as implicated in its own kind of theatrical process. Data as not simply information but rather a consequence of conversion process that turns information into a particular form of legible knowledge: it is subject to what Jean Alter describes in his definition of theatricality as the 'constant process of re-creation through transformation which revives old texts in new performances' (Alter, 1981, p. 115). It is in these 'new performances' that data is revived, embodied with real and material consequences.

In what follows, I will examine the literal and metaphorical possibilities of "voices" as both communicators of data as well as data themselves, drawing on different modes of multivocality to chart the entangled contradictions connects that public assemblies to deep fakes.

iii.   crowds (& bivocal aliens)

I want to begin this section on crowds with bivocal aliens, with a fictional account of how voices not only describe but also construct realities.

China Mieville's *Embassytown* is about a planet whose native inhabits – the Ariekei – speak with two voices (Miéville, 2011). The Ariekei also cannot speak figuratively, abstractly, cannot lie, and so must make similes in order to be able to explain ideas with more nuance: to say that it is like the rock that was split apart and put back together requires a rock be split and put back together. In *Embassytown*, interpreters are cloned pairs – something like twins but also something more – raised to be identical sets that speak the double-voiced Language of the Ariekei. Language – that is, the Ariekei's own multivocal language – is tied to personhood: those that do not speak Language are not people. It is a 400-page answer to the question of what kind of data is a voice? The answer being a voice is an index of personhood and political agency, a tool that both reflects and constructs the world. *Embassytown* is a novel about multivocality and personhood: it is about how speaking together – that is, as more than one voice but also with one another – defines personhood and shapes how we understand who can speak, can be understood. How what is articulated is always already also embedded in systems of meaning that confine and control as well as create.

This is, of course, what part of what Stuart Hall unravels throughout his work – including in the interview where he discussing the lines 'articulating' help shape the title of this symposium (Hall, 1986). Discourse shapes but also reflects knowledge. This is also Michel Foucault, who thinks as history as series of breaks in ways of knowing, traceable through their discursive presence. This is a process that theatricality allows us to witness and participate it: as Erika Fischer-Lichte suggests, a particular performance '…turns out to be a field of experimentation where we can test our capacity for, and the possibilities of constructing reality.' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 104). Fischer-Lichte argues that this theatricality focuses the audience's –

and this is the "we" who can test our capacity – attention on 'the very process of construction and the conditions underlining it' (Ibid.).

Embassytown is about how language, as discourse, shapes the world: not simply how meaning is made but rather about who is able to speak and who is able hear that speaking. It is a book concerned with ways of speaking at once: the Ariekei with their bivocal speech, the sets of Ambassadors who mediate between the Ariekei and the crowded Embassytown, and finally, in the disorder of political and social disintegration, these of speaking at once morph into a speaking together. It is this tie between structuring discourses and the new possibilities, I argue, that the crowd – where multivocality becomes an index of personhood and political agency – brings to the fore.

iv.   crowds (& multivocalities)

Obviously, the crowd as index of personhood and political agency exists in a real and tangible way through protest. In their book *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assemblage*, Judith Butler also takes up the Occupy Movement to trace the line that connects their early work on performativity to their later considerations of precarity through political assemblies and protests of all kinds (Butler, 2015). They write: 'Popular assemblies form unexpectedly and dissolve under voluntary or involuntary conditions and this transience is, I would suggest, bound up with their critical function.' (Butler 2015, p. 5). Butler presents the Occupy Movement and other moments of public protest as a complex exercise within which different voices were often at odds with one another and yet still come together in vital – if temporary – articulations. In *The Democracy Project*, David Graeber documents the Occupy Wall St movement in relation to a history of democracy as a less than inclusive project (Graeber, 2013). His account of Occupy specifically and protest generally echo Butler: the internal contradictions of this multivocality both impacts the effectiveness of the movement while also enabling them to develop tactics for creating – temporarily and at a scale local to the movement – operational practices that reflected the possibility of a different reality.

In that book, Graeber summarises Foucault's intellectual project in a quote that I have come to love for its concision, more so now because I find in it an echo of Fischer-Lichte's claim. Graeber writes:

> "forms of institutional knowledge—whether medicine, psychology, administrative or political science, criminology, biochemistry for that matter— are always also forms of power that ultimately create the realities they claim to describe" (p. 134 – 5)

Graeber's formulation brings us back to the critique already levied by McKittrick [and of course, many others: McKittrick is the reference that stands in here for that larger body of work]. Knowledge – data, information, etc – capture and construct. about what occurs in the conversion of data into knowledge. What is at stake isn't simply knowing but rather the formulating and constructing of reality and the rehearsal of other possibilities. Institutional knowledge exerts a performative power: constituting the reality they describe. What the crowd provides, creates with their many different and contradictory voices, is a theatricality that offers an otherwise.

Thinking this theatricality into the multivocal articulations crowds, we see through Butler and Graeber, that a group of voices can pose a challenge against systemic manifestations of power. The gathering together of the crowd is performative: it *does* this challenge be constituting itself as a group that can and does speaks to power. As voices of the crowd carry their meaning, theatricality enables us to understand how what was – what is – done is done. It names the iterative and ongoing constructions, multivocality are the many meanings and many perspectives held within the construction. For crowds, the multivocal theatricalities press on all manner of process of construction the press many meanings – often at odds – into the same voice.

v.   choruses (& theatricalities)

In Occupy, the crowds were on the streets. In Greek theatre, the chorus is the crowd. Made up of 'citizen volunteers', the chorus always represents some part of "the public" who comment on (and in some cases, contribute to) the events of the play. The chorus has been understood by theatre historians as representing an ideal audience, as it signals how to watch as well as being the vehicle for a Brechtian alienation effect, distancing the audience from the action so that they might consider its meaning and construction (Kitto, 1956; Weiner, 1980).

The chorus is the theatrical manifestation of the many that is also one, they are pivot point in the theatrical process. How do things become other things? How do actors become characters? Small groups of people become large ones? How do large groups become single crowds?

In the Wooster Group's production of Hamlet, the company performs a 1964 theatrical production starring the actor Richard Burton that was filmed and screened across the USA (with occasional extra Hamlets, such as Ethan Hawke's 2000 turn, thrown in) (Wooster Group, 2006). In this Hamlet, the actors perform on top of footage of the previous performances.

Part of what the Wooster Group do in this show and other shows like it – this is not the first or last time they play with footage, using video as a score to be reperformed or performed with – is not just performing with but mimicking, mapping their voice onto the voices that haunt their performances. This process makes literal what Jean Alter calls 'the constant process of re-creation through transformation which revives old texts in new performances', this, for Alter, is the core of theatricality, which he asks us to 'understand as the nature of that potential'. (Alter, 1981, p. 115). Theatricality, then, names the nature of change: it is this nature that is so clearly captured in the Wooster Group shows. Specifically, it is the voices of the actors who say the same things the same ways at different times that gives us its theatricality, that shows us the process and potential of construction.

The voice carries the text, but together the voices find a friction that tells us something else about the inherent multivocality of this play, all plays, all (public) language, all things said together. The actor is haunted by the past performances, the past performance is haunted by the present actor. The voice, as Adriana Cavarero writes in *More Than One Voice*, 'is always the voice of someone, essentially destined to speech, and which resonates according to the musical and relational laws of the echo' (Cavarero, 2005, p. 207). It is both musical – let me extend this into the artistic or aesthetic voice – as well as relational, existing for and invoking the listener, the audience.

In the Wooster performance, Hamlet becomes a composite: always haunted by the performances of past Hamlets as much as by his father, here the Hamlet on stage - imagery character – is a composite of the really real Scott Shepherd [who would later give his then partner Marin Ireland a black eye as their relationship imploded during the UK run of Troilus and Cressida (Healy, 2015)] and record of Burton's real performance. In the composite, the voices are the data, the information that finds its totality as the character of Hamlet, a character we cannot not see as anything other than pieces, a composite, a history of multiple voices saying the same line. Shepherd performs a kind of voice cloning in the show: trying, in real-time, to get his voice into another. Each performance is an iteration, a layer, of this process: an approach maintained or discarded depending on its effectiveness.

Theatricality enables us to think about data before and beyond the performative consequences, attending not only to what it articulates but how it is articulated and what kinds of relations – who and what enacts, who and what watches – are staged. Thinking with and through theatricality is one way of accounting for those things that seem inexplicable despite being – for the most part – very much a consequence of intentional construction. In the theatre, the knowledge or understanding of this construction doesn't diminish the magic, but rather it makes something of the tension between the knowledge of something's reality and the awareness of its construction.

vi.   composites (& conclusions)

I began with the claim that Vocality is implicated in theatricality: a voice participates in its own unique, embodied, and relational performance that is also always already entangled with meaning and discourse. I spend a day playing with Grimes's voice, playing things back to my spouse who is insufficiently excited or assumed: they say they don't know what Grimes sounds like, but it changed my voice, I say: it made my voice into another person's voice.

It is a clone of Grimes voice: I know this. Her voice has been recorded, those recordings analysed and some machinic order to it extracted, a mask that can be laid on top of my voice, once it has been analysed and a certain shell of how I was saying what I was saying has been extracted. Together, these processes produce a new voice. A composite of my voice speaking words that I recorded, and Grimes speaking whatever she recorded to get the system to learn how to make a mask, how to mimic both me and her at once.

I put my voice, my ideas, into Grimes's, into various machine voices. The thing I am working towards but have not yet arrived at is my own voice, and where it sits in this process. I became interested in voices because I wanted to clone my own: I wanted to clone my own voice because I was trying to figure out how to give voice to the knowledge system I was creating but also because I was trying to figure out how to stop speaking, trying to figure out how to join my voice with other voices the way I weave ideas one into another.

I haven't made this voice yet: I have cloned my own voice, using one of the increasingly available free trials of these tools, but I have not used the clone to say anything. I claim it is because I am too busy with this: writing a paper about the ideas that foment around it. Instead, I think about theatricality and how voice might be a way of attending to the transformations and conversions of data into reality, of reality into data.

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